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PROTEAN ASPECTS OF CHANGE IN EURIPIDES' MEDEA

Phillip Wilson

By drawing from the Homeric tradition, Euripides creates an image of Medea as epic hero with both the war-like qualities of Achilles and the cunning of Odysseus. To achieve this, Euripides alludes to specific Homeric passages then alters the image produced, and thus inscribes a sharper portrayal of his heroine. Throughout the play, Medea's "heroic" characteristics are established and reinforced as she assumes the aspects of Achilles and Odysseus, as well as other persons, in successive encounters. And thus, finally, the portrait that emerges of Medea is that of Proteus, the shape-shifting god tricked by Menelaus into revealing the plight of Odysseus following the sack of Troy.

Euripides' allusions to Homer begin early as he strategically places Medea off-stage for the play's opening. Though kept out of sight, she is still heard, lamenting her mistreatment at Jason's hands. Medea is then begged to come out, in much the same fashion Achilles is begged to rejoin Agamemnon's attack on Troy. As Homer invokes the muse at the outset of the *Iliad* to sing of the "wrath of Achilles" (*Iliad*, I, p. 23), here Medea's nurse presents Medea's wrath, the result of the indignities she has suffered. Medea's suffering, indeed, is a recurring theme in the play, invoking the Homeric epithet attributed to

Odysseus, he "who had suffered much" (*Odyssey*, XVI.266). At line 293 of *The Medea*, Medea herself makes clear this allusion to Homer by telling Creon, "through being considered clever I have suffered much." Euripides here points out Medea's Odyssean cleverness in the same breath as he manifests her suffering, ensuring the success of the allusion.

The shift in allusional representation of Medea at this point in the play begins again. At the play's outset Medea is described in ways evoking images of Achilles. She is at first reticent to enter, content to bemoan her mistreatment off-stage. Yet, like Achilles called upon to explain his anger, when Medea does come on stage, she is calm and possesses the ability to say the appropriate words. Following this, Euripides switches to sea images and the language of journeying to describe Medea (11. 255 ff.), and this, along with her own assertion of long-suffering, once again casts her in the role of Odysseus. Now, Euripides reverses the processes. After the nurse's reverse invocation, Medea again resumes the role of Achilles, when, at line 465, she begins to disclaim Jason's achievements as having been possible only through her assistance, much as Achilles discounted the likelihood of Agamemnon's achievements if not for his assistance.

Medea then recalls Jason having "often clasped [her knees] in supplication" (496-7). The audience, cognizant of some deeper, darker intent on Medea's part, and knowing that her revenge will be exacted on Jason to some degree, cannot fail to equate Jason's gesture to Medea with that of Lycaon to Achilles (*Iliad*, XXI, p. 382). In *The Iliad*, as Euripides' audience would be fully aware, Achilles violated the sanctity of the gesture of supplication and summarily executed Lycaon. With this precedent in mind, along with the Nurse's apprehension over what Medea may do, Euripides' audience can only expect Medea to likewise transgress. Medea's image as Achilles is further bolstered by Euripides emphasizing her ability with language. Like Achilles, she is no bad speaker and

adroitly portrays Jason as a coward (ll. 465 ff).

After another assertion of her Odysseus-like suffering, Medea reveals her plan to kill her children. Up to this point, she has been formulating her best means for revenge on Jason, mirroring Odysseus' "devising slaughter for the suitors" (*Odyssey*, XIX.1). Technically "guests" in his house, the suitors were under an implied protection by Odysseus, making his attack on them a violation of the imposed bonds of guest-friendship. Here, Medea's contemplated act immediately evokes Odysseus' act. In fact, Euripides is careful to use Homer's exact word: *σόνειον*, slaughter (*Odyssey*, XIX.2), in describing Medea's deed (Elliott, ll. 795,1305), thus strengthening the audience's connection of Medea to Odysseus. Because of the reversal added by Euripides—Medea's destruction of her family—Medea's plan is underscored and escalated. By tapping the audience's knowledge of Homer, Euripides is able to manipulate their expectations and enhance their reactions through his alterations of the familiar.

In alluding to any given passage of Homer, it must be remembered that, concurrently, the general framework of the *entire* Homeric body is also tapped. Thus, in recalling Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors, the underlying thrust of *The Odyssey* is necessarily evoked in the audience's frame of reference. When the slaughter is evoked explicitly, Telemachos' presence is implicit. Hence, Euripides is at once able to generally elicit from his audience a recollection of Telemachos' dilemma: Can a son be a man without his father, or can he assert his manhood without the knowledge of who his father is? In Euripides, Medea's plan is to deprive Jason of sons, thus in effect reversing the question: Can a man be a man without a son? Medea's (and Euripides') assertion here is that he cannot. To emphasize this, Euripides inserts the Athenian King Aegeus, who, at this point in his life, is childless. In the play he is portrayed as aimless and drifting,

trying to solve the problem of his childlessness, and it may be that Medea fully formulates her plan against Jason after seeing the perplexity of Aegeus' situation (Elliott, 86). Furthermore, Aegeus lacks the conviction the audience would expect from the king of Athens. When Medea presses him for a promise of sanctuary, Aegeus is reluctant to comply and ambiguous when he finally does. Thus, Euripides' Aegeus is not only childless but also is not fully a king. The correlation implied by the playwright is not lost on Medea.

In posing this question, Euripides is able to explore another Homeric theme: forms of immortality. Human immortality is achieved only through two means, being remembered in the songs of men, and as progenitor. Throughout the Homeric epics, warriors are referred to not only by their own names but, more importantly, by the names of their fathers.¹ Agamemnon and Menelaos are each referred to as "son of Atreus" (*The Iliad*, Book II, p. 55), Hector and Pallas as "son of Priam" (*The Iliad*, Book VI, p. 130). The Homeric focus is thus on the immortality of the father through his son. Euripides asserts that a man can have no such immortality if he has no sons; if there is no "son of Jason," Jason cannot achieve immortality. This may explain Medea's seemingly unprovoked murder of Creon's daughter. By allowing her to live and the marriage to take place, Medea would be giving Jason the opportunity to, in effect, replenish his stock, making Medea's sacrifice of his children moot. By destroying the marriage, Medea instead removes Jason's intended replacement lineage and thus his Homeric immortality.

After Medea's plan is fully revealed and its gravity understood, the Chorus again focuses the audience's attention on the Homeric tradition, asserting to Medea that, "when your children fall down and implore you, you will not be able ... " (l. 863). Here again the image is of Lycaon supplicating to a wrathful Achilles. Euripides' audience, in making this connection, knows what Medea's implied response is: she will

do exactly what Achilles did.

Throughout the play, Medea's behavior changes to fit her needs. At the outset, she is offstage lamenting. Then she arrives onstage and immediately begins calculating her plan. When Creon arrives to banish her, Medea is at first acquiescent, playing the repentant. She then seamlessly progresses through a humble, placating tone, to a suppliant and finally to a commanding rhetorician swaying Creon against his own will. When Jason arrives, Medea is fully forceful in her vehemence against him. Immediately upon his departure and Aegeus' arrival, Medea switches moods to that of Aegeus' old friend and confidant, willing to offer her help to him, yet easily manipulating Aegeus to her own purpose. Upon Jason's return, she is the suppliant again, begging Jason's forgiveness while in fact disarming him. In these chameleon-like incarnations, Euripides has here presented Medea in the role of Proteus, the shape-shifting "old man of the sea" (*Odyssey*, Book IV, 1. 365). Like Proteus, she changes shape until held steadfastly. Over the last third of the play, once she has proffered the deadly gift to Jason's bride, she assumes her true shape, granddaughter of the sun, escaping in Helius' chariot.

However, Medea is not the only shape-shifter in the play. Jason, whose exploits prior to the play's setting may be thought of as epic, is of less than epic proportion here. At times he is Agamemnon to Medea's Achilles; at others he is suppliant to her, and then, just as rapidly, he is her forgiving husband, blithely accepting professed assertions of his superiority. Finally, at the play's close he is Priam to Medea's Achilles, begging for the bodies of his sons so he can afford them proper burial. Jason, too, then, is Proteus.

This duality emphasizes Euripides' underlying assertion of change in *The Medea*. Not only do the characters change, but *Medea*, the play, shifts its shape as well. Euripides' very act of reshaping the basic story line of the Medea myth, combined

with his redefining of the traditional dramatic conventions in its presentation, underscores his message of change. Euripides utilizes uncharacteristic modes of speech (nurse as muse), unusual characters (woman as epic hero, dominant in all affairs with men), and revolutionary methods of presentation (discarding the familiar story line in favor of a new, unknown ending, effectively shocking the audience in the same manner in which the characters are shocked by Medea's actions). His message of change is echoed by the Protean aspects of his characters and reflected in the newness of his presentation.

Euripides' *Medea* is a reworking of the Medea saga, with Euripides using Medea to explore several elements of his precursors. Drawing on Homeric references and mythology, Euripides manipulates his audience's expectations by simultaneously comparing and contrasting their references to Greek literature. His play, which changes the very shape of drama away from that known to his contemporary audience, is finally as Protean as his epic heroine, Medea. Homer, embracing and then solidifying the oral tales of his culture, established Greek literature by transforming it into a written entity which is set apart from that which it supplants. By alluding so richly to the Homeric epics and then adding a unique twist to that tradition, Euripides transforms Greek tragedy in much the same way.

Notes

¹ It is interesting to note that, in her discussion with Aegeus on his childlessness, Medea makes three mentions of patrilineage: Her greeting to Aegeus is as "son of King Pandion"; when Aegeus mentions he has stopped in Corinth on his way to visit Pittheus, Medea notes the Troezen king is "son of Pelops"; and Medea caps off Euripides' Homeric use of this epithet — with a final Euripidean twist on the audience's expectations — by including *herself* in the Homeric nomenclature of heritage by saying to Aegeus "Swear by ... Helius, father of my father."

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